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Jacques and the Politics of Melancholia

1.

Leo Strauss formulates his conviction in this respect very firmly: “Without towns, there are no philosophers. Towns are indispensable conditions for philosophizing.”¹ If we decide to acknowledge this claim, then several consequences will follow. First, philosophy is not a domain of a totally “free,” “pure” thinking; it has its conditions upon which it hinges and which can certainly have their impact upon philosophy’s course. Second, although we tend to assume that philosophy is a domain of the individual and as such it belongs to the domain of the private, *polis* as a condition of thinking evidently translates it into the very heart of the public sphere. Philosophy cannot therefore look for a shelter in the isolated realm of the subject, it is inter-subjective, and therefore opened to various inspirations but also dangers coming from the outside. Third, if philosophy constitutes a most sublime effort of the human individual, then this very individual turns out to be limited and circumscribed in his or her individuality. Plato’s Socrates puts it succinctly in his intuition as to the origin of the *polis*: “[...] a city is due, as I imagine, to this fact, that we are not individually independent, but have many wants” (53).² The city is then nothing else but an organized congregation of, as Plato puts it, “many associates and helpers into one dwelling-place,” which accentuates the fact that the formation of *polis* is energized first of all by the notions of assistance and help. Those who are in need of much must recognize the profound fact that they are not self-sufficient and therefore, in consequence,

¹ Jakub Klein and Leo Strauss, „Wyjaśnienia” [Explanations], trans. Paulina Sosnowska. *Kronos* nr 2 (2012), 131.

² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. John Davies and David Vaughan (London: Macmillan, 1950), 53.

must take upon themselves the necessity of a certain indebtedness. The city is a complicated structure of debt and credit, material, moral, and also economic.

2.

The question of (in)sufficiency is central. Not only does it indicate the psychologically-grounded origin of the city but also it accounts for its open-endedness. The city begins, but then it does not seem to know where to end. In the dialogue Socrates keeps on enumerating professional skills, inevitable for the survival of *polis*, to conclude that the insufficiency of the human individual which stands at the origin of the city finds its continuation in the insufficiency of the city itself which has to grow in order to satiate (an impossible task) its wants:

Then we shall also have to enlarge our city, for our first and healthy city will not now be of sufficient size, but requires to be increased in bulk, and filled out with multitude of callings, which do not exist in cities to satisfy any natural want [...].³

The city, which as we have learned is indispensable for the practice of philosophy, develops along the trajectory which takes it away from the “healthy” situation in which the wants of men were still “natural” and evolves towards an ever greater divorce between “nature” and “wants.” Thus, *polis* is a result (never completed, as the wants, once made independent of their “natural” origin, have been set upon the spiral of inventiveness which knows no limit) of the growing separation not only between man and “nature” where “nature” stands for the physical environment of human life; first of all, the history of the city records a monumental betrayal – it poignantly demonstrates that man betrays himself or herself through the process of generation of wants which are not “natural.” Man not only conquers and thus betrays nature as the external environment but also deceives and colonizes himself or herself, circumvents his or her own “nature.”

³ Plato, *The Republic*, 59.

3.

Closer to our times Henry David Thoreau makes exactly the same observation. For the Concord sage the existential experiment conducted on the shores of Walden was to philosophically re-enact the experience of the frontier:

The incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well nigh incurable disease. We are made to exaggerate the importance of what work we do. [...] It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them [...].⁴

Frontier is now translated from the domain of civilizational progress and ruthless conquest of space into the sphere of man's existence where it is to perform a diametrically different function. If the historical *frontier* aimed at expansion and appropriation, its existential declension wants to achieve reduction and expropriation in order to disclose a deceptive role of what Thoreau calls "luxuries" (Plato's "unnatural wants") not as indispensable, but as "positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind."⁵ The expropriation in question not only refers to a criticism of the centrality of the notion of ownership, but, principally and more importantly, tries to name a specific approach of a subject to himself or herself. The distancing which characterizes this process is a necessary move beyond oneself, over the socially designated, and economically and administratively traced, borders, so that we could gain a position from which both individual subject and the structure of the society could be evaluated and then, hopefully, modified. Thoreau withdraws to his Walden hut not to simply avoid the community but to go beyond it, not to forget it but to remember it in a special way. What is at stake is a necessity of re-thinking the community and then, somewhat in a manner of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, of coming back to it in order to renew it. This is what Thoreau postulates under the name

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), 7.

⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, 90–1.

of “solitude.” It is not to be understood in terms of spatial designations (“Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows”), but by its critical potential embedded in the very act of “going beyond” the limits of the social. In fine, *solitude* is a mode of thinking which destabilizes and unhinges the structures which have been determining the construction of both social and individual life:

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. [...] I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another.⁶

4.

We should not underplay the seemingly off-hand proviso which indicates that a position of *solitude* is very likely to be dismissed, stigmatized, if not openly penalized, by being sent to the domain of illness. Those who position themselves at a critical distance from the established institutions and the ways in which they regulate social and individual lives risk being referred to as mentally unstable and as those who, by going beside themselves, have lost their “sane sense.” If we remember that the adjective “melancholic” was considered to be a synonym of madness, dispiritedness, *taedium vitae*, or *Angst* for a long period of time, and Robert Burton’s 1621 famous *Anatomy of Melancholy* allows us to consider melancholy not only as a form of madness but, more importantly, an irrevocable element of human condition (in one of the key fragments of the introduction to his work Democritus, Burton’s *porte-parole*, says plainly “[...] thou shalt soon perceive that all the world is mad, that it is melancholy, dotes”),⁷ then we cannot forego the fact that the first words which introduce Jacques in act 2, scene 1 of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* take us right into the very heart of melancholia’s darkness. Commenting upon Duke Senior’s hesita-

⁶ Thoreau, *Walden*, 9.

⁷ Richard Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 1 (London: Dent & Sons, 1948), 39.

tions about hunting and killing animals, one of the Lords says: "Indeed, my Lord, / The melancholy Jacques grieves at that."⁸ Sadness and death contribute to the attitude which bears the name of melancholy. It is sadness, grief over death, to be more specific, grieving over death – along two paths. One evidently brings us back to the question of human finitude – it is grieving over death which marks/mars every human life, a grief of and over mortality. The other capitalizes on this anxiety; it is grieving over a death which somehow is not "natural," which does not come at its due time but which is "artificially" imposed upon a living being, an untimely death, a death which has nothing to do with time. Succinctly, we could subsume the former type under the term of dying, whereas the latter would belong to the regime of killing. Duke senior wants to go hunting, that is, as he himself puts it, "go and kill us some venison."

5.

At this moment we enter the realm of politics. For Thomas Hobbes, fear, which stands at the root of human social organization, has to bring us to melancholy and must leave us in this domain since there is no way in which we make ourselves exempt from melancholy as the overwhelming existential *and* social mood. A fear of one human individual being afraid of his or her neighbour finds its extension in the fear which motivates the state to undertake violent actions against its own citizens. As Roberto Esposito declares, "it is in the presupposition of a generalized capacity for killing as the originary form of the human relationship that marks the structurally melancholy character of Hobbes's political theory."⁹ That Jacques is introduced while commenting on the scene of the kill is not incidental: not only does it present a critique of the human attitude towards nature, but, more importantly, it indicates that this attitude of absolute appropriation (which includes the right to deprive a being of its life) results from a general theory of the political-social organization of human life. The unfounded proclamation of man's dominion over nature is an effect

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* (New York: Gramercy Book, 1975), 229–55. All the other quotations will come from this edition.

⁹ Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, trans. Rhiannon Welch (New York, Fordham University Press, 2013), 30.

of the proclamation of man's dominion over being in general. Jacques's criticism of Duke Senior carefully combines these two realms: brutality over nature is a result of the brutality over another human being which, in turn, is an effect of man's claim to a ruthless control of being. As one of the Lords reports:

Indeed, my lord,
The melancholy Jacques grieves at that;
And, in that kind, swears you do more usurp
Than doth your brother that hath banish'd you. (2.1)

6.

Usurpation is a frequent theme in Shakespeare's plays. It deals with a loss of power taken over by one who betrays the idealized law of politics (politics aims at what is good for the widest public), first, by disrespecting the law which secures the legitimacy of power, and, second, by employing all kinds of tactical moves to legitimise the rule which, by definition, cannot be legitimized. The one who is a usurper tries to ignore not only his or her unlawful action but also, as Macbeth's case demonstrates it, this person also disregards signs with which reality incessantly reminds him or her of the truth of usurpation. As Duke Senior was ousted from power by his deceitful brother, in the same way now, in his Arden Forest exile, he perpetuates the same kind of action through chasing away and eventually eliminating animals who, as he himself confides, are "native burghers of this desert city." This is the second reason why it is difficult, if not impossible, to leave the enchanted circle of melancholy. If the first reason held that melancholy is an innate condition of human life, the second maintains that since man is a being which deprives other beings of what is theirs, and then those who have been deprived of their legitimate dominion execute the same kind of usurping activity against those who still hold on to their realm, if we deal with a long, unending sequence of usurpations, then melancholy, which carries a dark loss in its centre, must also be the element of the political and social. The first kind of loss is detectable in every individual human being. As Burton puts it: "No man amongst us [is – T.S.] so sound, of so good a constitution, that hath not some impedi-

ment of body or mind.”¹⁰ The second kind of loss deserves the name of deprivation, as it de-privatizes decrement in question and puts it forth as a rule which has to be taken into account in the organization of human politics. In this respect Burton precedes Hobbes:

The greatest enemy to man is man, who by the devil’s instigation is still ready to do mischief, his own executioner, a wolf, a devil to himself and others.¹¹

7.

The loss which is the dark source of the organization of human individual and social life is nothing else, to put it simply, but a certain mis-use of the world. It is not so much the very notion of usability, usefulness, practical application, which Jacques comments upon looking at the murderous activities of the hunting lords; at the centre of his reflection is the fact that the proper use, the legitimate use, the use which would serve life, has been replaced by a mis-rule, a mis-application, a mis-use in the service of a double death. A death of (political, economic) adversaries, of those who try to keep their own domain, the “burghers” of their “native” realm; but also a death of the public good which in the act of usurpation is being brutally translated into the language of a private gain. Duke’s “shall we go and kill us some venison” is a clear indication of this move. The animal which exists publically in its native domain becomes, through the act of killing, mere flesh, no longer a “stag” but “venison.” The culinary has usurped and extended its dominion over the living. The etymology of *usurp* reminds us of this shift; clearly related to the Latin *usus*, it swerved towards a kind of use which has been broken, betrayed, mis-sed (without ceasing to be a kind of devilish, dark, use), *usum rumpere* or *usurapere*, that is to seize for one’s own use. We are just one step short of economics, where *usury* signifies a mis-use of money to generate profit for a private party, private enjoyment. In his report on Jacques’s behaviour the Lord twists all these threads into one argument:

¹⁰ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 1, 137.

¹¹ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 1, 134.

Thus most invectively he pierceth through
 The body of the country, city, court,
 Yea, and of this our life: swearing that we
 Are mere usurpers, tyrants, and what's worse,
 To fright the animals, and to kill them up
 In their assign'd and native dwelling-place. (2.1)

8.

Nothing escapes the critique of the melancholic mind which clearly recognizes the over-all pattern of history: the displaced ones will seize the nearest occasion to keep on with the work of usurpation. "This our life" refers to a supposed counter model of community of people who have been mis-used by others but who cannot, despite their declarations with which Shakespeare's comedy opens, stop from claiming spaces not theirs. The melancholic politics of Jacques recognizes this mechanism of displacement, mis-use, and de-assignment, of the denial of "native dwelling-places" and draws two conclusions: that criticism of such an organization of political and social life is possible only from its inside, and that to be able to undertake such a critique one must place oneself on the periphery of community. Thus, there is a "negative" and a "positive" aspect of melancholy. The former deals with the numerous tactics of usurpation and politics of expelling beings from their native places; the latter allows us, precisely because of the constant shift of places, to see the drawbacks and limitations of the mechanism of mis-use. Duke Senior inadvertently touches upon this visionary aspect of the politics of melancholy when he speaks of Jacques as of one who in his solitary placement on the periphery of the community is able to disclose what is important, what matters for the very community, and what the community cannot itself see. Departing for the forest where he hopes to find Jacques, he declares that it is such a peripheral being, a being without an easily locatable place, that provides the community with an insight it cannot afford:

Show me the place:
 I love to cope him in these sullen fits,
 For then he's full of matter. (2.1)

9.

Duke Senior wants to be directed to “the place,” and the definite article is an indication of the importance of such an unmappable position. It is only from such a placing that the community can learn something substantial (“full of matter”) about itself. At the periphery of the periphery, where we have “lost” hopes associated with the loss as a possible improvement (and Duke staunchly represents such hopes in the renewal of the politics and society), in such an almost impossible position of sadness (“sullen fits”), we can truly reflect upon the community in the way which does not reproduce the usual organization of such reflection. Thus, Jacques as a melancholic politician, or, rather, as a politician of melancholy, wants to deliver a certain truth about community which will shake its foundations by demonstrating that the practice of filling up the empty place is wrong, because to deal with a loss we have to acknowledge it as such rather than continue the politics of producing more losses which are to, paradoxically, fill up the vacant space. This is what Duke Senior and his courtiers do when they hunt the animals of the Arden Forest: they fill up the empty place and the empty time both of which have opened suddenly at the moment of the loss of power. Community is thus viewed as a complicated system in which the constant usurpation of empty spaces leading towards the practically illimitable extension of the territory (described by Plato as the main mechanism energizing the life of *polis*) must be counteracted by the reductive movement originating from the peripheries – that is, from the recognition of and confrontation with the limit. In this counteraction the politics of melancholy meets the aesthetics of the sublime:

Melancholy is a virtue for Kant because, wresting man from every unmerited self-valorization, it procures for him the moral consciousness that is inseparable from his own freedom. Continuously striking against his own insuperable limits, the melancholic man is the only one who grasps that the only way to realize a lack is to keep it as such.¹²

¹² Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 34.

10.

The moral consciousness inseparable from one's freedom reveals itself when we are facing the limit, which means that we are expropriated from our "native place" not because it has been usurped by somebody else, but because we have given up on the idea of the native place to begin with. This is what we find in a long exposition of Jacques's politics of melancholy at the beginning of act 4 which is a strong manifestation of a lack or loss conceived of as the only possible place which we can try to name our "own" in full awareness that, in fact, it does not belong to me. I can call "mine" only what I have first identified as somebody else's and from what I then tried to distil my "own" subjecthood. Before we quote Jacques's manifesto, Rosalind's response will clearly describe the situation in which "I" is nothing else but an empty slot after having determined alien territories, "I" is what appears empty-handed and what has quite consciously allowed itself to be dispossessed of anything that could be called its "own." To Jacques's statement of the politics of melancholy which presents the empty-handed "I" as a "traveller" Rosalind replies: "A traveller! By my faith, you have great reason to be sad: I fear you have sold your own land to see other men's; then, to have seen much, and to have nothing, is to have rich eyes and poor hands" (4.1).

11.

Sadness of melancholic disposition results from the experience of "nothing" which in terms of economy means "selling" without profit, selling below the price, and in the order of senses it moves all the accent from the touching of ownership (having) to the nothingness of seeing. Having "rich eyes and poor hands" is Shakespeare's formula for melancholy which "is made of nothing and impossible to appropriate because melancholy is made up of expropriation itself."¹³ It is this force of "nothing" which allows for another way of thinking about community, a thinking which accentuates its indeterminate character. Since melancholia stems from the "nothing," its thinking resigns from any identifiable, ideologically predetermined positions and speaks on behalf of the hermeneutics of what is

¹³ Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, 29.

identifiable not so much through mere negation and denial, but, rather, through the logic of “not quite this and not quite that” which also involves a constitution of the subject. Jacques provides us with a long list of examples of this logic in his speech:

I have neither the scholar’s melancholy, which is emulation; nor the musician’s, which is fantastical; nor the courtier’s, which is proud; nor the soldier’s, which is ambitious; nor the lawyer’s, which is politic; nor the lover’s, which is all these: but it is a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects: and, indeed, the sundry contemplation of my travels, in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness. (4.1)

Melancholia as a manner of political thinking defuses the power of established social roles, as well as denies the possibility of being inscribed under any of the adjectives commonly used to render the activities characteristic of these roles. But while claiming its “own” position, it also compromises it since what is referred to as “mine” is a mosaic of elements borrowed from what is definitely not my “own.” Politics of melancholia can be practicable only from such an unmappable and indescribable place from which we can try to modify the ways of community.

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